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XXIV.—SIR PERCEVAL AND THE BOYISH EXPLOITS OF FINN

The relations between the English romance, *Sir Perceval*, and its counterparts in French, German, and Welsh have been frequently and extensively investigated.¹ Efforts have been made also to show connections between the story of Perceval (especially the boyhood portion) and various other stories—the “Fair Unknown” (*Libeaus Desconus*) group, the romance of *Fergus*, the lai of *Tyolet*, and the Irish tales of Cuchullin.²

Another Irish story which has not, it seems to me, received the attention it merits in this connection is *The Boyish Exploits of Finn*. The resemblances between it and the English romance were first pointed out by Alfred Nutt in 1881.³ He believed *The Boyish Exploits* to be a fifteenth-century composition;⁴ and he repeated this be-

¹ For bibliog. see Wells, *Manual of Writings in M. E.* (New Haven, 1916), pp. 71-74, 772-3. To this add: Martin, ed. of *Parzival* (Halle, 1900-1903), vol. II; Hertz, *Die Sage v. P. u. d. Gral* (in his trans. of Wolfram's *Parzival*, Stuttgart, 5th ed., 1911, pp. 413-550), and Rosenhagen, *Nachträge* (*ibid.*, pp. 551-572); Voretzsch, *Einf. in d. Stud. d. altfranz. Lit.* (Halle, 2nd ed., 1913), pp. 322-345; Foerster, *Wörterbuch zu Kristian* (Halle, 1914), einl., pp. 145-202.

² For reference on *Lib. Des.*, see Wells, p. 772; on all four, see Voretzsch. On *Fergus*, see also Heinzel, rev. of Martin's ed., in *Zt. f. d. oest. Gym.*, xxiv (1873), pp. 156-167. Marquardt's *Der Einfluss Kristians auf den Roman 'Fergus'* (diss. Göttingen, 1906), although the most extended study of this romance, is unfortunately of little value. Innumerable other possible connections are suggested in Chamberlain's *The Child and Childhood in Folk-Thought* (N. Y. and Lond., 1896), esp. chap. xxiv, “The Child as Hero, Adventurer, etc.”, a book written from the point of view of anthropology rather than that of literary origins. The bibliog. (pp. 495-434) is valuable.

³ “The Aryan Expulsion-and-Return Formula,” *Folk-Lore Record*, iv, pp. 1-44.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

lief in 1888, 1891, and 1910.⁵ This late date was supported in long arguments by Zimmer in 1890 and 1891;⁶ and it has been generally accepted by students of the story, including d'Arbois de Jubainville, Newell, Miss Paton, Miss Weston, and Professors Schofield and Griffith.⁷

Belief in a much earlier date was expressed (entirely without reference to possible connections with *Sir Perceval*) by O'Donovan in 1858, by Miss Eleanor Hull in 1906, and more recently by John MacNeill and Kuno Meyer.⁸ Nutt only a short time before his death twice intimated that he was then inclined to accept the earlier date.⁹

The evidence of the manuscript, Bodleian Laud 610, is as follows.¹⁰ Inside the cover is pasted a slip, dated 1673, stating that the manuscript is copied from older and now

⁵ *Studies Leg. H. G.* (1888), p. 158; *The Fians*, ed. Campbell (1891), "Bibl. Notes," p. 284; *Folk-Lore*, xxi (1910), p. 400.

⁶ *G. G. A.*, 1890, 2, pp. 521 ff.; "Kelt Beiträge," *Z. f. d. A.*, xxxv (1891), pp. 1 ff.

⁷ d'Arbois, *Essai d'un catalogue* (1883), pp. xxxviii, 174; Newell, *Leg. H. G.* (1902), pp. 88, 92; Paton, *Fairy Myth. of Arth. Rom.* (1903), p. 181; Weston, *Leg. Sir P.* (1906), I, p. xix. Schofield does not refer to *The Boyish Exploits*; but he would hardly take the fifteenth-century *Lay of the Great Fool* as evidence for the existence of such stories in early Celtic if he knew an earlier story embodying substantially the same features. (See his *Eng. Lit. Norm. Conq. to Chaucer*, p. 228.) Griffith, although he mentions *The Boyish Exploits* several times, makes clear his acceptance of a late date by saying: "I have made no inquiry into Old Irish literature." (*Sir P. of G.*, Diss. Chicago, 1911, preface.)

⁸ O'Donovan, *Trans. Oss. Soc.*, iv, p. 284; Hull, *Text-Book of Irish Lit.*, I, p. 244; II, pp. 26, 43; MacNeill, *Duanaire Finn*, I. T. S. (1908), p. xxix; Meyer, *Z. f. c. P.*, VII (1909-10), p. 524; *Fianaigeacht*, R. I. A., T. L. S., xvi (1910), p. xxviii.

⁹ *Folk-Lore*, xxi (1910), p. 110; *Arnold's Study of Celtic Lit.* (1910), p. 166.

¹⁰ This account of the ms., which I have not seen, is based on Todd, *Proc. R. I. A.*, II (1840), pp. 336 ff.

not extant documents, including the "Psalter of Cashel." This psalter was compiled by Bishop Cormac, who died in 903. On folio 86a appears a gloss stating that this copy was made in 1453, the date accepted as the time of composition by Nutt and Zimmer, and, as I have indicated, by most subsequent writers.

It is generally agreed that evidence is required to disprove the statement of a manuscript or an early printed book as to its origin. When Arthur Brooke in the preface to his poem, *Romeus and Juliet*, tells us that he "saw the same argument lately set forth on the stage," we do not deny his assertion merely because no play filling the bill is extant. When the Doctor's tale of Chaucer names Livy as its source, we deny the assertion when we discover that the Doctor's version differs from Livy's in an important particular, and follows the version given in the *Roman de la Rose*. The claim of Laud 610 that it is a copy of much older documents should be accepted unless evidence to disprove is presented. Aside from this fact, and from the fact that Zimmer's argument for the confusion of two psalters¹¹ is far from convincing, the only evidence of date is linguistic. Now there is no more uncertain occupation than the dating of early Irish documents;¹² and there are probably not more than three or four living men who would venture an opinion on the subject. Two of these, as indicated above, have examined *The Boyish Exploits*: MacNeill accepts the date of Bishop Cormac—tenth century; Meyer assigns it to the twelfth century.

When we see, then, that *The Boyish Exploits* is at least

¹¹ *Z. f. d. A.*, xxxv, pp. 119 ff.

¹² On the subject of dating, see Nutt, *Z. f. c. P.*, II (1898-9), p. 320; Meyer, *King and Hermit* (1901), p. 5, n. 1; Brown, *Mod. Phil.*, VII (1909-10), p. 204; Nutt, *Folk-Lore*, XXI (1910), pp. 239-240; Cross, *Mod. Phil.*, X (1912-13), p. 292.

as old as any story yet cited in studies of *Sir Perceval*,¹³ and is possibly older than any, the seven incidents common to the two become of some significance.¹⁴ I shall set these incidents down very briefly.

INCIDENT I—Death of the Father

Cumall, Finn's father, fell in battle	And now is Percyvell the wighte Slayne in batelle and in fyghte.
(180) ¹⁵	(161-2) ¹⁵

By itself this incident would hardly deserve notice. The Irish version, however, is at least as near the English as any yet cited.

INCIDENT II—The Forest Rearing

Finn was carried into the for- est by two "heroines," and se- cretly reared.	Perceval was carried by his mother (with one maid) and reared.
(181)	(163 ff.)

The differences here are more striking than the resemblances; but they are not so great as in many parallels given by Nutt and by Professor Woods to bring *Sir Perceval* under certain folk-lore formulas.¹⁶ In view also of

¹³ For approximate dates see Griffith, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-3; Schofield, *op. cit.*, App. I (pp. 458-465).

¹⁴ Cf. Brown, *Iwain*, p. 120: "A student of literary origins early learns that, altho incidents survive and may safely be used to trace a source, the name of the hero of any particular incident changes with considerable facility."

¹⁵ Text and trans. of *The Boyish Exploits* in *Trans. Oss. Soc.*, iv (O'Donovan); text (Meyer) in *R. C.* v (1881-3), and trans. (Meyer) in *Eriu*, 1 (1904). Figures under the Finn incidents refer to pages in *Eriu*, 1. Figures under *Sir Perceval* incidents refer to lines in the edition of the romance by Campion and Holthausen (Heidelberg, 1913).

¹⁶ Nutt, *F.-L. Rec.*, iv; Woods, "A Reclassification of the Perceval Romances," *P. M. L. A.*, n. s. xx (1912), pp. 524-567. The subject of "formulas" seems to me to be sadly overworked; see, for instance, Heyman, *Studies on the Havelok-Tale* (diss., Upsala, 1903), p. 92; Schoepperle, *Tristan and Isolt* (Frankfort and Lond., 1913),

the widespread occurrence of the "forest rearing" theme, it need not be stressed here beyond observing that *The Boyish Exploits* is probably earlier than any story yet found containing this feature.

INCIDENT III—The Hero's Early Prowess in Hunting

Finn cuts off at a shot the feathers and wings of a duck on the lake.	Perceval shot small birds (217), and harts and hinds (218); and
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So wele he lernede hym to schote,
þer was no beste, þat welke one
fote,

To fle fro hym was it no bote,
When þat he wolde hym have.

(221-4)

The treatment of Perceval's skill in hunting seems to me the natural procedure for an author who had the Finn story before him. Perceval first shoots birds, as does Finn in his first chase; but instead of repeating the fantastic details of the Irish story, the romancer merely makes a general statement of the boy's proficiency.

INCIDENT IV—Catching Wild Animals

Finn's nurses lament that they cannot get one of a herd of wild deer. Finn catches two "bucks," and brings them to the women.	Perceval sees a group of wild horses, catches the "biggest," and rides to his mother on it.
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(325-348)

(183-4)

In the two aspects of incidents III and IV, *expertness* in shooting, and *agility* in catching wild animals, *The Boyish Exploits* is the only old story offering parallels.

I, pp. 206, 214, 221, 223; II, p. 280; nearly the whole of Deutschbein, *Studien zur Sagengeschichte Englands* (Cöthen, 1906). All such attempts at classification should be considered in the light of Windisch's caution in *Das kelt. Brit. bis zu K. A.* (Leipzig *Abhandl.*, 1912), pp. 198-9.

INCIDENT V—Suspecting the Hero's Identity

The King of Bantry, with whom Finn has taken military service, is so much impressed by Finn's deeds, that he says: "If Cumall had left a son, one would think thou wast he." (184)

Arthur says that if the hero were well dressed, he would resemble the elder Perceval (545-548); and again:

The kyng bi-holdez þe vesage free,
And ever more trowed hee
þat þe childe scholde bee
Sir Percevell son. (585-588)

This incident, which has not, so far as I have discovered, been noted, appears to me one of the most striking parallels. Here, moreover, as in incident III (expertness in hunting), *Sir Perceval* contains just the sort of thing to be expected of a writer who was elaborating and improving the Irish narrative.

INCIDENT VI—Discovery of the Wailing Woman

Finn "heard the wail of a woman," who lamented that her "only son had been slain by a tall, very terrible warrior."

(185)

Perceval hears near by as if a woman were crying. He finds a woman bound to a tree by her husband, the Black Knight, who has wrongly accused her of infidelity. (1817-1856)

As in incident II the difference here is more striking than the similarity. The kernel in both is clearly the solitary woman *who had been in some way wronged*; and this seems to make unjustifiable Professor Griffith's conclusion that "the story of a *Suspected Lady*" (italics mine) "was incorporated into the framework to make the tale of Perceval." ¹⁷

INCIDENT VII—Avenging of the Wronged Woman

Finn pursues and kills the "terrible warrior." (185)

Perceval conquers the Black Knight. (1881-1932)

In both cases the hero avenges *the woman who has been wronged*.

¹⁷ Griffith, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

APPENDIX TO INCIDENT VII

The Hero Ignorantly Avenges his Father

The warrior killed by Finn proves to be "the Grey One of Luachair, who had dealt the first wound to Cumall in the battle of Cnucha."

(185)

Perceval, in slaying the Red Knight, who had taken Arthur's cup, slays also (without knowing it) his father's slayer. (141-144, 553-560, 601-624, 629-640, 689-692, 709)

In incident VII the story and the romance appear to part company—Finn slays the wrong-doer, Perceval only vanquishes him. In the romance, it should be noted, the death of the Black Knight was not essential; it was essential only that he be brought to confess his error and be reconciled to his lady. If, moreover, we turn back to Perceval's *first* personal combat, we find an explanation of the variation in incident VII. In his adventure with the Red Knight Perceval had already accomplished what Finn accomplishes in his *only* personal combat; viz., had avenged, though *unintentionally* and *ignorantly*, his father.

In view, then, of these facts: (1) that *The Boyish Exploits of Finn* is certainly older than the English romance; (2) that it contains these seven incidents in common with the romance; (3) that the incidents occur in the same order in both narratives; and (4) that three of the incidents (IV, V, VI) are found in no other story of the Perceval group—in view of these facts I think we have reason to believe that the Irish story was known to the writer of the romance, and that it was not improbably used by him.

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